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ABSTRACT

A study of resilient at-risk students was commissioned by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium to identify factors that students believed contributed to their academic success. Sixty-two resilient and academically successful at-risk students from six school divisions took part in in-depth interviews. Factors identified by students were classified into thematic categories. Positive use of time and meaningful involvement in school or other activities were frequently mentioned by students as success factors. In addition, the majority articulated clear and specific long-term goals. Students' personal responses indicated that they had an internal locus of control and accepted personal responsibility for their successes and failures. The perceived influence of school and teachers was inversely related to grade level. Younger students thought that teachers and counselors played a more important role in their successes, while older students had more neutral attitudes toward school. Almost all of these students had come from dysfunctional homes, but most could name one or more persons who had been significant in helping them. These findings indicate that there are important environmental factors that influence the development of strong, resilient personalities and beliefs. Results of this study, taken with other research findings, suggest several general recommendations that will help translate the findings into help for at-risk students. Sharing information, planning and evaluating programs, selecting and evaluating personnel carefully, providing preservice and inservice education, and targeting programs carefully are important aspects of programs for developing resilience. (SLD)

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Research Brief #18

November 1994

STUDENTS WHO DEFY THE ODDS: A STUDY OF RESILIENT AT-RISK STUDENTS

Despite substantial investments of resources, the at-risk student continues to be a major concern of educators. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the definition of "at-risk" and on the effectiveness of programs to help these students succeed, the premise of this study was that much could be learned from at-risk students who have been academically successful.

The purpose of this research brief is to report the findings of the study of resilient at-risk students commissioned by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) and conducted by Professors James McMillan and Daisy Reed of Virginia Commonwealth University (1993). The study defined a resilient at-risk student as one who has all the characteristics of an at-risk student but has been successful in school.

The study used qualitative, in-depth interviews of resilient at-risk students from six school divisions to identify factors that these students believe contributed to their success in school.

Principals and guidance counselors in the six school divisions were asked for nominations of resilient students based on established at-risk indicators such as low socio-economic status, being retained in grade, dysfunctional family, and drug abuse, as well as demonstration of successful academic progress. One hundred fifteen resilient students were nominated. A total of 62 students took part in individual interviews that lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Each session consisted of one of eight trained interviewers using a standard interview protocol that asked students about hobbies, goals, school, teachers, home, neighborhood, and what has helped them succeed. Notes were taken during each interview, 43 interviews were tape-recorded, and the data were analyzed inductively to identify important themes.

RESULTS

There were no meaningful differences among the responses by community setting (urban, suburban, or rural), gender, or race. Students with disabilities or those receiving special education services did not respond differently, as a group, from the other students.

Results were classified into six thematic categories: current activities, goals, personality characteristics, opinions about school, opinions about home and neighborhood, and opinions about help from others.

Current Activities.

Positive use of time and meaningful involvement in school and/or other activities were frequently mentioned by the students. With some exceptions, this involvement was not in a special program or group for at-risk students or students with specific problems. Elementary students spent their spare time involved in a wide array of hobbies and interests that included both individual and group activities, such as reading, sports, riding bikes, attending Sunday school, and organized activities. Most older students worked and were involved in several meaningful activities, such as music, sports, hunting, or church.

Involvement in activities may provide an important social-psychological support system by connecting the students to others in meaningful ways. Success in these activities may be important in enhancing self-esteem by providing recognition and a sense of accomplishment.

When asked how school can help other students succeed, resilient at-risk students often mentioned the importance of involvement in activities. For example, they said:

"Get involved in extracurricular activities. Anything besides just going home and getting into trouble."

"Have more activities for the students to become involved in."

Goals.

When asked to indicate goals and wishes, the majority of the students articulated clear, specific long term goals. Older students especially, tended to have goals that were much more realistic, more long term, and usually included some college education. Their responses to questions about goals showed that they were motivated to do well and were optimistic about the future. They had hope, despite all the negative circumstances in their lives, and had confidence that they could achieve their long range goals.

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For many of the older students a particular experience, either direct or vicarious, reinforced the importance of getting an education and motivated the students toward positive goals. The experience may have been dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, being in drug rehabilitation, or some other difficult event or circumstance that showed them that without an education, the ability to successfully achieve their goals would be limited.

Personality Characteristics.

The participants were asked what they believed contributed most to their success, and why they believe others who may be similar to them have not done as well. The students' responses very clearly revealed an internal locus of control and personal responsibility for their successes and failures. They attributed poor performance to internal factors such as a lack of effort, lack of caring, lack of trying, lack of studying, goofing off and playing around. Most respondents thought that poor performing students could do better if they worked harder and took school more seriously.

A strong sense of self-efficacy was also indicated; the students were successful because they chose to be so, and gave much credit to themselves. The students did not believe school, neighborhood, or family was critical in either their successes or failures. Sometimes a poor home environment would make things difficult—most of the students lived in dysfunctional families and lived in a low-socioeconomic area—but they did not blame their performance on these factors. The students also did not blame their peer group or friends. Most indicated an independence from others and were comfortable being different from their peers.

When asked about what they believe contributed most to their success, resilient at-risk students revealed an internal locus of control. For example, they said:

"...work as hard as you can and it will probably pay off."

"The way I've been raised is to be independent, have a mind of my own and decide for myself what fits my life-style."

Opinions About School.

The perceived influence of school and teachers was inversely related to grade level; younger students felt teachers and counselors played a more important role in their experiences and successes, whereas older students tended to have a more neutral attitude toward school.

Elementary school students expressed a desire for a "fun" school environment and for teachers that are easy to get along with, funny, somewhat strict in their class work and discipline, easy to talk with, patient, and willing to listen and explain things. Several elementary students mentioned that support or counseling groups were very helpful, as were counselors who conveyed a sense of privacy and trust. Older students preferred teachers that had positive expectations and that would push the students while remaining very supportive and understanding.

When asked to describe the teachers they like the best, resilient at-risk students said:

"They like to teach, they don't rush you, they take their time, they are nice to me, they make sure I understand and I know it better."

"She was strict but she was nice."

"She pushes you to put forth your best effort."

"I like the teachers that you know what to expect from and you know that they're going to help you in any way they can... I don't like teachers who don't really care about the kids."

Opinions About Home and Neighborhood.

Almost all of the resilient students came from dysfunctional homes. Many had severe stressors in the home, either due to family makeup or the absence of one or both of their parents.

Homes and neighborhoods were described as difficult but they were not seen as a hindrance. They did not believe, in the main, that either the neighborhood or home was influential in school success. In general, students liked where they live, however, they realized that it could be better and often wished that they had a better home. Many students indicated a need for a home environment free of distractions.

Help From Others.

Most resilient at-risk students had little difficulty naming one or more persons who had been significant in helping them. When asked about role models they usually mentioned an adult with whom they had close contact, such as a family member (usually the mother), rather than a sports figure or other celebrity. Mothers, grandparents, and teachers or counselors were chosen most frequently by younger students; older students mentioned friends as much as adults.

Like good teachers, the ones most admired were also persons who took a great interest in them and who were willing to listen without criticizing or judging. Virtually all the students indicated that there was someone trustworthy to whom they could go for help.

When asked to whom they would go to for help concerning a problem, resilient at-risk students said:

"I'd be more willing to talk to my mother...there's very few people that you can really truly trust with things."

"...I'd go to someone I could really trust, which is only about four people."

CONCLUSIONS

The above findings suggest that there are important environmental factors that influence the development of strong, resilient personalities and beliefs. These factors are illustrated in the following conceptual model (see figure 1). The model shows how significant relationships with adults, positive use of time, provision of encouragement and high expectations, and recognition of accomplishment form a psychological support system to aid in the development of resiliency. The presence of this support system at home, school and in the community leads to the development of constructive personality traits such as self-efficacy, goals orientation, optimism, internal expectations, personal responsibility, and coping ability. These traits, in turn, lead to resiliency.

The challenge to schools is to provide the psychological support system that can foster the development of these resiliency traits in all students, but particularly in at-risk students. The research is clear that the day to day efforts of teachers, counselors, and administrators working with parents and their communities can make a difference by providing positive relationships and by creating and maintaining a supportive environment. Schools that accept this challenge will have to reorient their environment to provide such a support system.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

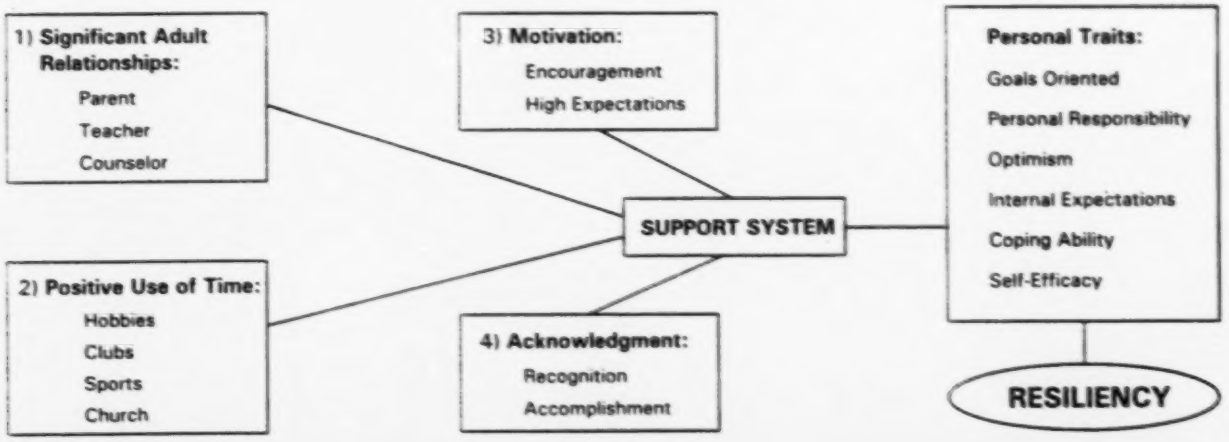
The results of this study, when integrated with other research on at-risk students, suggest several general recommendations that will help translate the findings into meaningful action to enhance the success of at-risk students.

Share Information

Teachers, counselors, administrators, school board members, parents, and citizens need to be knowledgeable about the characteristics of resilient at-risk students and the factors that affect the success of at-risk students. In-service days or other workshops for staff development could be used to present the findings of this research and discuss what schools can do to make sure that important factors are included as part of the experience of every student.

Figure 1

Developing Resiliency in Students



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Planning and Evaluation

These findings can be used to plan and evaluate programs that are targeted to help at-risk students, at both the division and school level. The results can constitute a checklist of components or principles that should be included in planning or setting up a new program.

Existing programs can be reviewed to determine the extent to which the findings undergird the program. Grant proposals can include the principles and/or the model to demonstrate a systematic, research-based approach that is targeted to important factors. School renewal teams can use the results in developing school goals and programs that will address the needs of at-risk students.

Personnel Selection and Evaluation

The results can be used in the selection and evaluation of school personnel. Teacher and administrator candidates can be evaluated on the basis of their knowledge and sensitivity to the factors that affect the success of at-risk students. The criteria for selection and job descriptions of teachers and administrators can be reviewed to determine the extent to which the findings from this study are included. Criteria and procedures for evaluating the performance of teachers and administrators can be reviewed to be certain that they include the findings from this study.

Pre-Service and In-Service Education

Pre-service teacher education, counselor education and administrator programs can use these results to sensitize teachers and counselors to the characteristics of at-risk students, and what it takes to help these students succeed. College and university programs can be reviewed to determine the extent to which these findings are included. In-service programs for teachers and counselors can use these results to raise awareness and understanding of how at-risk students can be helped.

Refocus at-risk programs

Current programs for at-risk students focus on identifying the characteristic that an at-risk student exhibits and then developing a program to ease the characteristic. This reactive approach has been successful to a degree. However, when one considers that only nineteen percent of at-risk students develop resiliency and are successful in school, a more productive proactive long term approach would be to develop school climates that support the development of resiliency in all students but particularly in at-risk students.

Specific, systematic and enduring programs need to be developed that will help at-risk children become resilient. The major goals of the programs should be related to the development and nurturing of the factors and variables that are common among resilient students and should address the themes cited above. In addition, the programs should span the grades from kindergarten to twelve, with an emphasis on early childhood intervention. The programs should encourage parental involvement and should provide opportunities for parent education.

Researchers, educators, and other concerned citizens must understand that resilient students are a product of a series of complex processes involving school environment, family support, and individual attributes. Therefore, many programs developed for them must address complex concerns and issues and offer multifaceted solutions and alternatives.

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Answers to questions found in this research brief have been synthesized from the MERC publications listed below. To obtain a copy, please contact the MERC office.

McMillan, J. H., Reed, D. R., & Bishop, A. (1992, June). A qualitative study of resilient at-risk students: Review of literature. 58 pp. ($3.50)

McMillan, J. H. & Reed, D. R. (1993, January). Defying the odds: A study of resilient at-risk students. 86 pp. ($8.50)

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